Yucatan: Before and After the Conquest

I read Yucatan: Before and After the Conquest by Diego de Landa, a Spanish friar who went to the Yucatan peninsula to help bring peace, civilization and Christianity to the “Indians.” De Landa describes many aspects of the Mayan culture, the language, the land and biodiversity, and even some of the politics taking place. He also talks about the Spanish and their side of what happened in Yucatan.

The Mayan people had a very complex set of religious beliefs that involved a lot of ceremonies, rituals, celebrations, sacrifices (blood, human and nonhuman), incense, and prayer. They had ceremonies that were performed every month and ceremonies that were contingent upon what was happening in their world. Their family structure consisted of one man and one woman joined by marriage in which men participated in most of the religious ceremonies and politics, while the women mastered domestic responsibilities, economics, and raising the children. The women were also very devoted to their husbands; infidelity was not something tolerated among the people of Yucatan. Fathers sought wives for their sons and once married, they changed their names – an event that happened many times throughout their lives. The Mayan people placed a lot of significance on tattoos (mostly on the men), feasts, drinking, dancing, and music. Some of their primary occupations included pottery, wood-working, dancing and music. They had many sources of food including wild game, fish, fruit, roots, grains, beans, and peppers.

The Spanish arrived at Yucatan in waves, not all at once. The first were Geronimo de Aguilar and his companions, then Franciso Hernández de Córdoba from Cuba, Juan de Grijalva, Hernando Cortés, and finally the friars. The initial explorers were mostly chased out by the Mayans, although some befriended the Spanish. Once they got a foothold with the people of Yucatan, they took over, capturing, enslaving, and killing many. They made an effort to force their religion and culture onto the Mayans. The cruelty of the Spanish did not go unnoticed by the friars upon their arrival and they attempted to put a stop to it. The friars took a gentler approach and their focus was on converting the native people to Christianity. They started with the Mayan children who then spread it to the adults.

Overall, the book was a fairly complex read. It read like a documentary or textbook, in many short sections and very straightforward discourse. That said, the author jumped all over the place topic-wise and phrased things in an out-dated manner, seeing as the observations were made originally in 1566. Not only were the topics disorganized, but the book was also not written in chronological order. It would speak of the death of a particular person, then mention them again in the following section. That said, it was very interesting to learn about the Mayan culture from this perspective. However, I am mostly left feeling saddened at the destruction of the culture and the lack of value placed on human diversity.